

CO-PARENTING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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Abstract

This study assessed factors contributed from parents who live in two different households and that lead to academic success. Data were collected from undergraduates enrolled in a Midwestern satellite university. Academic success was defined by university enrollment, grade point average, and standardized testing scores. Co-parenting factors that were hypothesized to lead to academic success included the distance between parents homes (which further influenced time spent with the child, participation in child's activities, and participation in decision making) and financial stability (which also influenced participation in decision making and the level of conflict within the family). The original structural equation model revealed that the relationship linking the distance between homes and the time spent with the child was accurately described. Added to the model, after the Lagrange test, was a path from finances to participation in child's activities and time spent with the child. The financial stability of a family predicted the participation of the non-custodial parent in the child's activities, in the decision-making for the child, conflict, and the time spent with the child. Implications for practitioners who work with families with co-parenting responsibilities are discussed.

Keywords: Co-parenting, divorce, academic success (3-5 words)

Introduction

In the last fifty years, divorce and separation of cohabitating couples has become a common occurrence in Western culture (Blaisure & Geasler, 2000). Kreider and Simmons (2003) found that in 2000, 18.5% of the population of the United States, or 41 million people, were widowed,

divorced, or separated. Extant literature on divorce has demonstrated an increased risk of behavioral, psychological, and academic problems for children (e.g. Amato, 2000; 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emory, 2003), and so it is important to understand positive factors that may contribute to the academic success and financial independence of these children.

I.

Co-Parenting

Co-parenting has been defined in the literature as how couples coordinate their efforts to raise their children (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Margolin et al. (2001) noted that much of the current research on co-parenting has focused on married couples, but that the co-parenting relationship differs from the marital relationship. Maccoby, Depner, and Mnookin (1990) defined co-parenting as how mother and father support or undermine one another in their mutual parenting roles. Co-parenting involves the division of parenting duties and the acknowledgement of the other parent's authority in those duties. Gable, Belsky, and Crnic (1995), as well as McHale (1995;1997), have found that significant components of co-parenting include amount of involvement by the two parents, joint problem solving on childrearing tasks, and the conveyance of unity between parents and children. Family therapy research has primarily focused on the definition of co-parenting that stemmed from family systems or structural theories. Minuchin (1985) viewed co-parenting as an extension of the marital relationship that involves transactions with a third individual, namely the child. According to Minuchin (1985) and von Bertalanffy (1968), the co-parenting relationship is a unique subsystem within the family in which the quality of the marital relationship interfaces with how mothers and fathers coordinate their efforts to deal with childrearing issues. Although researchers have found that co-parenting is related to the marital relationship and its quality (Gable et al., 1995; Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan 1998), few have looked at co-parenting as society changes and the marital relationship is removed from the equation. Lindsey, Caldera, and Colwell (2005) stated that there is a deficit in our understanding of the factors that contribute to effective co-parenting.

Most of the research on co-parented children has focused on the negative impact of divorce. Increased stress, decreased academic performance, economic decline, and behavioral problems have all been identified in the divorce literature as negative consequences (Amato, 2001; Amato & Booth, 1996; Amato & Keith, 1991; Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Parish, 1995; Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, & Abrams, 1993; Ellwood & Stolberg, 1993; Evans & Bloom, 1996; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella,

1998). Studies of the effects of divorce over time, as the children of divorce become adults, found similar negative effects (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Cherlin et al., 1991; Millward, 1997). Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis that found across numerous studies that children, adolescents, and adults from divorced families and remarried families, in comparison with those from two-parent non-divorced homes, are at increased risk for developing problems in adjustment. They also found that, compared with adults from continuously married families of origin, those who experienced parental divorce as children had poorer psychological adjustment, lower socioeconomic attainment, and greater marital instability (Amato & Keith, 1991). Other research has shown that the quality of parenting declines during the years immediately following divorce as custodial parents struggle to manage the demands of single parenting (Emery, 1998; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Riina and McHale (2014) extended this view by noting the bidirectional nature of co-parenting, as well as the gender differences that may exist in the relationship and outcomes. Much of the differences noted by researchers focus on stress associated with marital disruption and can vary which effects the speed and degree of adjustment, depending on resources and the family situation (Amato, 2014).

Single parent homes also have been found to produce a risk for problems in adjustment (Amato, 1987; Emery, 1998; Funder, 1996; Hetherington et al., 1982; Parsons, 1990; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Parsons (1990) conducted a study on Canadian children of single parents and found their educational and occupational achievement to be lower than children of two parent always-married families. Qualitative studies have shown that children raised by single mothers think positively about their fathers and wish for more frequent contact with them (Amato, 1987; Funder, 1996; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children's desires are clear, whether the parents are next door or across the world: children long to remain close to their parents. Belsky, Crnic, and Gable (1995) recognized the individual differences in patterns of co-parenting but suggested that the investigation of factors associated with the quality of co-parenting may assist clinicians and family practitioners who are interested in prevention of and intervention in perturbations of family functioning.

Predictors of Academic Success

Several factors have been found to relate to the academic success of children parented from two homes. Studies on the prevalence of divorce among adults whose own parents divorced show a larger effect for those with lower educational attainment, earlier entry into marriage, earlier childbearing, lower income and lower socioeconomic well-being (Amato, 1993; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found

in their study of intergenerational effects of divorce that low income accounted for about half of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Building on these findings, it is possible that academic success and higher educational attainment may raise one's income and socioeconomic status, and lessen the intergenerational transmission effect of divorce, especially as high academic achievement is becoming increasingly necessary to maintain competitiveness in today's economy as well (Ray, Bratton, & Brant, 2000). Parents may take into consideration what contributions they make that can keep their children on track to become competent adults with good career prospects.

Distance. The distance between parental homes is a contributing factor in the amount of parent participation with the children. Furstenberg (1988) suggested that geographic distance between fathers' and children's residences, which was considered a situational factor, was more influential in determining visitation patterns than was the co-parental relationship. Bowman and Ahrons (1985) found that fathers who had joint custody were significantly more involved in parenting and had greater contact with their children than were non-custodial fathers.

Physical presence is not the only way to ensure the well-being of children, but it does contribute to the payment of child support (Furstenberg, 1988). Today's technology has made it possible for those parents who are separated from their children by a great physical distance or time constraints to maintain frequent contact with them. E-mail, instant messenger services, cell phones, text messages, and even the advent of video communications have provided these parents with alternative methods of staying in close contact with their children. Both of these factors, distance and physical contact, have been recognized in the literature as contributing to the well-being of the child (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Financial Stability. Financial stability, assisted by the contribution of child support to ensure the needs of the child are met, is a known contributor to the well-being of children (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Amato & Booth, 1996; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Arditti & Keith, 1993; Maccoby et al., 1990; Teachman, 1991; Wood & Repetti, 2004). Child support, or the money that the parent with less physical custody pays to ensure the needs of the child are met, must also be negotiated for the well-being of the children. Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) and McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) pointed out the importance of increasing the number of child support payments made to single mothers, increasing the amount of that support, and enforcing awards strictly.

Thompson and Amato (1999) stated that society's recognition of the importance of this obligation to pay child support was "one of the themes of policy reform in the 1980s" (p. xvii), and added that "media images of the

‘deadbeat dad’ led to the Family Support Act of 1988, which strengthened enforcement procedures for the child support obligations of the non-custodial parents” (p. xvii). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found in a meta-analysis of 63 studies that nonresident fathers’ payment of child support was positively associated with measures of children’s well-being.

According to Wallerstein and Huntington (1983), how often children get to see their father may have financial implications in terms of sharing parental responsibilities and economic support. The greater the father-child contact, the more likely the father will bear a greater financial responsibility (Arditti & Keith, 1993). Several studies (Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, and Zill, 1983; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; Teachman, 1991) have found a positive relationship between child support payments and the frequency of contact with children. DementÉva (2003) found support for the view that the costs of children’s upbringing in a co-parented family are linked primarily to the impact of negative economic factors. This supports the view that parenting from two different homes usually adds a financial strain. Jenkins, Rasbash, and O’Connor (2003) state that single parenthood and family size are both family structural variables that would be expected to limit parenting resources and increase stress.

Time. In custody arrangements, a timesharing plan, or agreement on the amount of time the child spends with each parent, is typically worked out during divorce proceedings. Most parents create structure for the time they will spend with the child (usually referred to as residence or residential custody and visitation) and for decision-making (legal custody), allowing the family to build a new binuclear family structure and move on with its life tasks (Lebow, 2003). Amato, Kane, and James (2011) sum up the research on children’s adjustment by stating that adjustment is facilitated when both the nonresident and resident parents are cooperating in co-parenting relationships and are involved in their children’s lives. Thus, whether it is a divorce, separation, or parents that are never married, it is not the type of custody decision made that is important, but how the parents interact with each other and their children that is important.

Decision-Making. Decision-making, or legal custody, is a complicated issue in the research. Many parents may have been granted joint legal custody, but do not exercise that right to engage in the decision making process. Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, and Dornbusch (1993) found that 40% of the nonresidential parents thought they were as involved with their child as the residential parent. The custodial parents disagreed, stating that on day-to-day decisions, they themselves made major and minor decisions alone, and sometimes they consulted the non-custodial parent after the fact. The continued participation of non-custodial or joint custody parents in major and minor decisions could enhance the closeness of the

parent-child relationship and lead to more positive outcomes for their children. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that feelings of closeness and authoritative parenting were positively associated with children's academic success and negatively associated with children's externalizing and internalizing problems.

Conflict. Disputes over distance, child support, time, and decision-making may lead to detriments to the well-being of children. There are several factors that negatively impact the children of separated parents; however, conflict between parents seems to be the most heavily supported predictor for these negative outcomes (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Belsky et al., 1995; Kitzmann, 2000; Margolin et al., 2001; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Dronkers (1999) and Richmond and Stocker (2003) examined children of families with marital conflict and found that children who experienced more marital conflict than their siblings had more adjustment problems than their siblings. McHale (1995) observed family interaction patterns and found that marital conflict is linked to hostile-competitive co-parenting. Pruett, Williams, Insabella, and Little (2003) used structural equation modeling to examine the relations among family dynamics, attorney involvement, and the adjustment of young children at the time of parental separation. They found that paternal involvement, the parent-child relationship, and attorney involvement mediated the amount of parental conflict experienced by the children. Bonach and Sales (2002) suggested that in order to attain the best outcomes for their children, parents need to get beyond the negative feelings, thoughts, and actions that affect their ability to co-parent effectively.

Since parents in conflict often do not come to compromises easily, clients often turn to attorneys, family court judges, arbiters, domestic relations mediators, parent coordinators, child custody evaluators, and family therapists to help settle these types of disputes. Whitworth, Capshaw, and Abell (2003) have investigated the effectiveness of court-endorsed divorce parenting programs that have emerged as a community-based effort to reduce the negative impact of divorce on children and their families. These third parties (who are asked to resolve disputes), as well as the parents, should know what factors would contribute to minimal negative and maximum positive effects in the children. Lebow (2003) suggests that therapists working with divorcing families in conflict need to develop skills to interface therapy with the judicial system.

Theoretical Framework

There are many marriage and family therapy theories that support both parents being involved in child rearing. Family systems theory suggests that all members of the family exert an influence on each other, even after

the occurrence of a divorce (Ahrons, 1981; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The family gets used to the present circumstances and does its best to maintain homeostasis. Negative and positive feedback loops in the family's interaction help to maintain the homeostasis (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Even the family's own attempts to find a solution may help to keep it in a dysfunctional state. This is why conflict may continue long after a divorce or separation.

Structural family therapy came about largely through the work of Salvador Minuchin, whose work tried to change the underlying structure of the families he saw in order to enable the families to solve their problems. The family structure was composed of the patterns of interacting, which governed the functioning of family members, and problems were maintained by the dysfunctional organization of the family (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). When boundaries are crossed or the children are at the top of the hierarchy of the family, dysfunction occurs. Parents must remain in control together as equals for optimum parenting of children (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Maintaining the hierarchy or boundaries within the family structure and its subsystems would give the child something consistent while facing the uncertainty of having parents in two separate homes. Minuchin (1974) described co-parenting as the extent to which partners share leadership and support one another in their mutual roles as architects and heads of the family. The co-parenting structure is a subsystem within the larger family system whether the parents are married or unmarried.

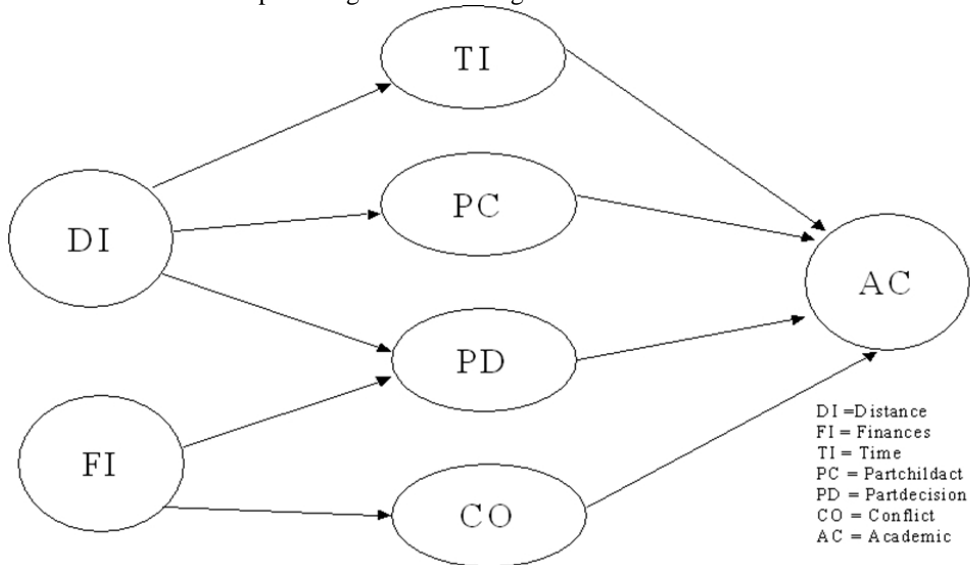
Hypotheses

Ray et al. (2000) stated that the increasingly competitive nature of the employment market is requiring individuals to achieve a level of education beyond high school to meet the basic financial needs of their future families. This study identifies elements of the co-parenting relationship that relate to the academic success of co-parented children. For the purposes of this study, academic success is defined as the college students' self-reports of grade point average, standardized test scores, and the educational goals of the subjects.

Our overall prediction is that shared financial responsibility and shorter distance between the two biological parents will influence factors that will contribute to the academic success of the children. Figure 1 represents the model that will be used to test the hypotheses. Our first hypothesis is that parents whose homes are less physically distant from each other will (a) spend more time with their child as a result of this proximity, (b) participate more in their child's activities, (c) participate more in decisions about the child, and (d) report less conflict with their co-parent. Our second hypothesis is that parents who report greater financial stability will (a)

participate more in decisions about the child and (b) report less conflict with their co-parent. Our third hypothesis is that (a) spending more time with their child, (b) participating more in their child’s activities, (c) participating more in decisions about the child, and (d) reporting less conflict with one’s co-parent will predict greater academic success for the child.

FIGURE 1: Co-parenting factors leading to successful academic achievement



Method

Participants

For this study we recruited a sample of 145 undergraduate students taking a psychology class at a regional comprehensive primarily commuter Midwestern university. Participants’ age ranged from 17-37 years old, with a mean of 21.7 years (*SD*=4.0). The respondents identified themselves as 59.3% Caucasian, 25.5% African American, 13.1% Hispanic/Latino, 1.4% Native American/Alaskan Native, and 0.7% Asian.

Most participants came from lower-middle class working families in Northwest Indiana. Participants ranged from having \$0 income to \$120,000 in household income, with a median of \$50,111 (*SD*=31,336). Of the respondents, 77% identified themselves as single, 10% as married, 10% as cohabitating/partnered, and 3% as divorced. Completed education ranged from high school to 4 years of college, with 24% having completed high school only, 24% having completed one year of college, 23% having completed 2 years of college, 18% having completed 3 years of college, and 6% having completed 4 years of college, and 3% having earned an associate’s degree. Of the 145 respondents, 8% are trying to attain continuing education credits, 6% are trying to attain an associate’s degree, 46% are trying to attain bachelor’s degree, 31% are trying to attain their

master's degree, and 10% are trying to attain a Ed.D., Ph.D., PsyD., DMFT, or M.D.

The respondents ranged in age from pre-birth to 30 at the age of their parents' separation with a mean parental separation age of 8.3 ($SD=6.2$). Most (65%) were age 10 or younger, 26% were ages 11-19, and 4% were 20 or older when their parents separated. When asked about their parents' marital status, 70% reported their parents had been married and then divorced, 18% reported their parents were never married, 6% reported their parents were married but separated, and 6% reported other causes of binuclear homes. Participants were asked if any other adult lived in the home; 55% reported someone else living in the home during their childhood. Of the respondents who did report that their home did include another adult, 24% lived with a stepparent in the home, 15% lived with a grandparent in the home, 8% lived with another (unrelated) person in the home, 6% lived with a relative in the home, and 1% lived with both a stepparent and grandparent in the home.

Materials

The survey used was adapted from Spanier and Thompson (1984), which gathered information relating to individuals' adjustment to separation and divorce. Questions were modified from "Part 7: Children" in order to collect information pertaining specifically to non-custodial parents or those with joint custody arrangements. The model tested incorporated variables related to (a) the parent-child relationship (custody, contact, visitation), (b) economic factors (child support) (c) the co-parental relationship (relationship quality, agreement over child rearing), and (d) background information (education, age, distance from children).

Distance. The distance variable was measured with 4 items. Participants' self-report of the miles between their parents' homes measured actual distance in this survey. We also asked participants to give their perception of that distance; specifically, whether they felt that the distance between homes was very close or far apart on a 5 point scale (0 = very close to 4 = far apart). We also examined whether a parent had moved residences and, if so, whether that parental movement was closer to or farther away from the other parent. We computed scale scores for distance by taking the mean score on the 4 items. The higher the number, the greater the distance between homes.

Financial Stability. We used 5 items to measure financial stability. We asked participants how often their non-custodial parent paid child support on a 4 point scale (0 = never to 4 = always). We modified questions from Spanier and Thompson (1984) and asked if the non-custodial parent contributed financially to the child's extracurricular activities (0 = never to 4

= always). We also asked participants to give their perceptions of their custodial parents' concern over finances (e.g., did your custodial parent worry about money; 0 = never to 4 = always) and their own perception of the family's financial stability (0 = not sure to 4 = stable). The mean score on the 5 items was used to compute a score for financial stability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .23$)

Time. We measured time by the respondents' self-report of how often their non-custodial parent visited them as children or how often they visited the non-custodial parent (0 = never to 6 = daily). We modified these questions from Spanier and Thompson (1984) and asked participants their non-custodial parent's visitation schedule and if that schedule was regular on a 5 point scale with (4 = set schedule to 0 = none of the above schedules). We then asked participants about their perceptions of their non-custodial parent's involvement with them as children on a 5 point scale with (0 = don't remember involvement to 4 = very involved). Time was computed by summing these 3 items and taking the mean.

Participation in Decision-Making. We asked participants to state whether or not their non-custodial parent cooperated with the custodial parent in making decisions about the children using questions modified from Ahron's (1981) 10-item Quality of Coparental Communication Scale, composed of a 4-item conflict subscale and a 6-item mutual support subscale. All items have a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "always." We also modified the Content of Coparental Interaction Scale (Ahrns, 1981) for use in this study. This scale assesses how often former partners communicate about parental and non-parental issues. For the purposes of this study, only the parenting issues scale was modified. Higher scores on the parenting issues scale mean that frequent discussions between former partners about their parenting have occurred.

Participation in Child's Activities. Several questions asked participants whether their non-custodial parent attended their activities (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, plays) or in some other fashion participated (e.g., helping to plan special events such as birthdays). We also included questions modified from Ahron's (1981) 10-item Quality of Coparental Communication Scale. All items have a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "always."

Conflict. We measured conflict by asking participants questions directly about its presence (e.g., Did your parents argue about money?). We also modified questions from Ahron's (1981) 10-item Quality of Coparental Communication Scale, composed specifically from the 4-item conflict subscale. All items have a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "always."

Academic Success. We measured academic success in multiple ways. First, we assessed progress in academics by asking for participants' self-reported grade point average. In addition, we asked for self-reports on standardized test scores. Lastly, the educational goals of the subjects were also examined.

Procedure

We recruited participants by asking professors for permission to speak to their students in 200 level, or second year, psychology classes during the last 20 minutes of their class period. We asked students to participate in the survey if their biological or adopted parents did not live in the same house. We then asked participants to read a consent form and add their signature before completing the survey. We gave participants 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, or if they preferred, they could return the questionnaire (in a provided envelope) at a more convenient time to the Behavioral Sciences Department. All participants completed the questionnaire within the allotted time.

Results

Assumptions

After the appropriate data screening, we found that no univariate or multivariate outliers were present ($p \leq .001$). Using Mahalanobis distance, we identified no multivariate outliers. Of the completed 145 questionnaires, only 82 (57%) were fully completed with no missing data. We ran a missing values analysis to verify that the values were missing at random. Most of the missing data were from the variables that had multiple indicators, and were replaced using regression imputation to avoid problems in the statistical analysis. A matrix of scatterplots tested and confirmed the assumption of linearity. Using a matrix of correlations, we tested all pairs of variables for multicollinearity and found that none were multicollinear.

The Hypothesized Model

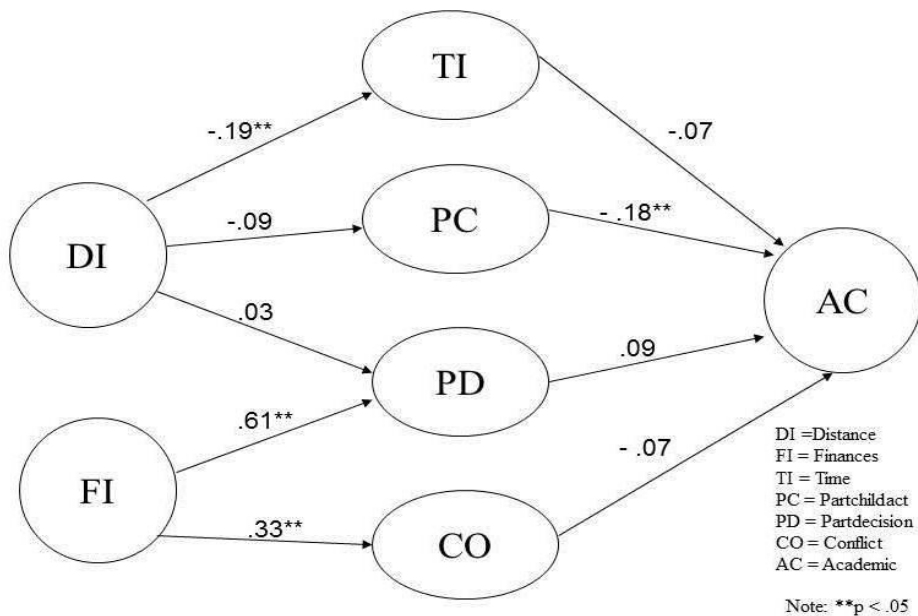
We tested the adequacy of the theoretical model in Figure 1 using structural equation modeling. We used two exogenous predictor variables to examine these relationships: distance between the parents' homes and the contribution of financial stability. We predicted that these two variables would influence four mediating variables: the time spent with the children, participation in the children's activities, participation in decision-making, and the amount of conflict within a co-parenting family. We predicted that these four variables would in turn predict the academic success of co-parented children. In addition, we allowed each of the four mediating variables (time spent with children, participation in children's activities,

participation in decision making, and conflict) to covary with each other, reflecting the similar measurement format and common source of many of those items.

Test of the Structural Equation Model

To evaluate the model fit, we performed maximum likelihood estimation using EQS (Bentler, 2004). We rejected the independence model that tests the hypothesis that all variables were uncorrelated, $\chi^2 (21, N = 145) = 361.3, p < .0001$. We tested the hypothesized model, and found that it did not provide a good fit for the data, $\chi^2 (5, N = 145) = 80.5, p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .78, Bentler-Bonnet Normed Fit Index = .77, Bentler-Bonnet Non-Normed Fit Index = .07, Standardized RMR = .19, RMSEA = .32 (see Figure 2 for standardized path coefficients for this model). A chi-square difference test indicated a significant improvement in fit between the independence model and the hypothesized model, $\Delta X^2 (16) = 241.9, p < .001$. As hypothesized, distance between homes predicted time spent with the child in the model. Financial stability predicted both participation in decision-making and conflict. However, all other hypothesized relationships were not significant, and no variable significantly predicted academic success.

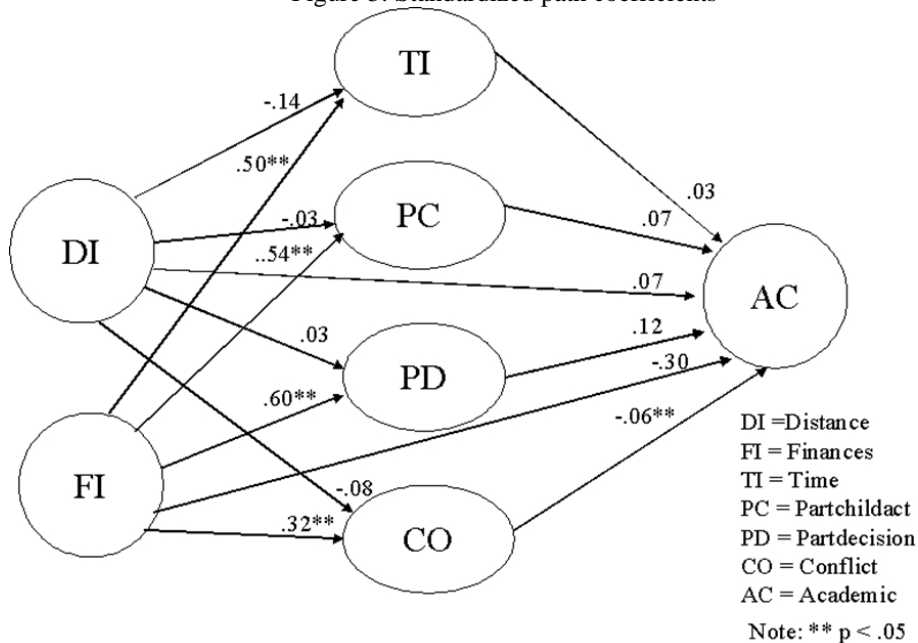
Figure 2: Standardized path coefficients for path analysis model



We performed post hoc model modifications in an attempt to develop a better fitting model to the data. On the basis of the Lagrange multiplier test, we added direct paths from Financial Stability to Time and Participation

in child’s activities and to Academic Success. The resulting model was a very good fit to the data, $\chi^2 (2, N = 145) = 2.4, p = .31, CFI = .999$, Bentler-Bonnet Normed Fit Index = .993, Bentler-Bonnet Non-Normed Fit Index = .989, Standardized RMR = .035, RMSEA = .036. A chi-square difference test indicated that the model was significantly improved by the addition of these paths, $\Delta\chi^2 (3) = 78.1, p < .001$. Financial Stability was a significant predictor of academic success, distance was no longer a significant predictor of time spent with children, and the significance of all other parameters in the model remained unchanged. The final model including coefficients in standardized form is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Standardized path coefficients



Conclusion

Structural equation model

Using the child’s perspective on the parent subsystem, we found that the original model was not complex enough in describing the relationships between factors. Although the relationship between the distance between homes and the time spent with the child was accurately described in the original model, the relationships between distance and participation in the child’s activities, participation in decision making, or conflict was not accurately predicted. Also in the models, financial stability was found to have a significant relationship with participation in decision making and conflict. This suggests that financial stability predicts how much the parents communicate with one another and whether that communication is positive

or negative. The model showed that the greater the financial stability the lower the conflict. This is consistent with Maccoby (1990, as cited in Thompson & Amato, 1999) who stated that joint custody is better if the parents cooperate but worse if they cannot. For highly conflictual families, increasing distance may be the only way to decrease the amount of conflict. This finding is also consistent with Pruett et al. (2003) who found conflict to be mediated by parental involvement. This supports the systemic family theory that all family members continue to influence one another (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and that conflict may continue after separation.

Also added to the model, per the suggestion of the Lagrange test, was a path from finances to participation in child's activities and time spent with the child. The financial stability of a family predicted the participation of the non-custodial parent in the child's activities, in the decision-making for the child, conflict, and the time spent with the child. This finding is consistent with that of many other studies (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Amato & Booth, 1996; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Arditti & Keith, 1993; Maccoby et al., 1990; Teachman, 1991; Wood & Repetti, 2004). It is not surprising that financial obligations, the only factor that family courts across this country consistently enforce, is so influential, compared to all the other factors in this study, in predicting academic success.

Limitations

The sample in this study was derived from a university in Northwest Indiana. The convenience sample was not necessarily representative of the general population, and the sample size was relatively small ($n = 145$), at least for applications of structural equation modeling. Caucasian and single students, and students still living with their parents were over-represented; married, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian populations were underrepresented. The genders of the participants in the study were not collected. This omission leaves important questions unanswered. For instance, female participants may have reported different perceptions on the amount of time or participation with their non-custodial parent, which was often the father in our population. Further, the ages and gender of siblings were not collected. This omission also leads to unanswered questions as to whether having an older sibling may mediate the absence of a parent. Further research might examine the impact of such factors on the academic success of co-parented children.

Participants were asked to comment on their perceptions or recollections of their parents' interactions; however, participants' memories of their parent's relationship may not have been as accurate as asking the parents directly, and thus using prospective studies may be more fruitful in resolving this problem. The value of the collected data is subject to the

accuracy and honesty of the participants' answers to survey questions. Further, social desirability may have influenced the measures of academic success, participation in child's activities, participation in decision-making, time spent with the child, financial stability, and distance. In addition, there was no discussion of resiliency variables.

Finally, the final model was based upon post hoc model modifications. Although it revealed several important connections among variables, those connections were not specified *a priori*, and thus need to be replicated in a subsequent sample, lest they reflect capitalization on chance in the present sample.

Implications

Our contribution to the literature on co-parenting factors can be useful in the formation of interventions for these families as they struggle to restructure in a functional way. The findings from this study are consistent with earlier studies that have explored the factors that positively influence academic success in children of divorce. Implications from this study are organized around the role identity of the client, divorced parent or child of divorce, and institutional-level change.

Divorced parent as client

It is important for clinicians to recognize that financial stability consistently proves to be one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes for children of divorce; however, it is also one of the most difficult factors to influence. This suggests that clinicians can share this finding with clients and emphasize the importance of financial security and its long-term benefits for children as well as for the client, in general. Areas in which clinicians might successfully focus include helping the client develop strong communication skills; this may enable better negotiation with the former spouse as well as enhance the relationship between parent and child. By encouraging the client to recognize the relationship between family-based conflicts and academic performance, the clients are being empowered to positively and actively influence their children's success. During a divorce, the dyadic relationship between parents frequently overshadows any attention needed within the parent-child relationship. Encouraging parents to re-focus on their children might be more effective through the sharing of research findings and child outcome such as those presented here.

Child of divorce as client

When working with children, it is important to provide them with a sense of safety and security as this is often missing in their home lives shortly after a marriage dissolves. By providing an atmosphere of openness,

they will be better able to discuss any negative feelings or fears they might have in relation to their parents' divorce.

Institutional-level change

Although the judicial system is now championing the effort to minimize the negative effects of children from binuclear homes through the use mandatory child support, this study suggests that more can be done to positively influence these children. The parenting alliance, and all the responsibilities that parenting entails, could also be supported by the court system through better parenting or co-parenting classes as well as through mediation. Parents, judges, child advocates, and therapists could routinely assess the factors discussed in this study. Key for these all parties is the decrease in conflict because of its negative correlation with academic success. Minimizing the conflict within the co-parental system should be addressed, and rules of negotiation (or a plan for dealing with differences of opinion between parents) should be integrated into divorce proceedings, custody hearings, mediations, or early in the therapy process.

Based on these findings, the ideal structure is a co-parenting structure that is financially stable and has minimal conflict. The knowledge of factors that would contribute to the well-being and future success of co-parented children, could guide this restructuring. Margolin et al. (2001) suggested that “even highly conflictual spouses generally tend to understand the importance of promoting their child’s welfare, an intervention that focuses on co-parenting may be acceptable to spouses who are not willing to undergo other types of therapy” (p. 17).

In summary, it is clear that the effects of a poorly negotiated divorce can have negative repercussions throughout the life of a child. Using the findings from this study, clinicians can be better suited to assist parents and children as well as advocate for organized change in the formal systems in which divorce is handled.

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